

Church Fathers, Heresy, and Creeds

Sources

F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (2004)

Michael A.G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers: Who They Were and How They Shaped the Church* (2011)

Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (1984)

Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Heretics* (2014)

Caspar Olevianus, *An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* (2009)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2

I. Church Fathers

A. Nature

1. Earliest surviving witnesses, though not always dependable
2. Considered “orthodox” (not heretics)
3. Teachers of the church (chap. 9 in González)

B. Major Work

1. Apologies (defending the Faith): Justin Martyr
2. Polemics (attacking heresy): Irenaeus (against Gnosticism)
3. Systematic teaching of theology: Origen

C. Fathers and “Tradition”

1. “Oral Tradition”: Teaching passed orally by Christ to Apostles
2. “Consensus of the Fathers”: Agreement of the Fathers’ witness to Tradition
3. Challenged by contradictions

II. Major Fathers

A. Apostolic Fathers

1. Nature

- a. Earliest post-NT writers
 - b. Supposedly students of the apostles
 - c. Works are occasional and personal
2. Clement of Rome (c. AD 100)
 - a. Bishop of Rome
 - b. Epistle to Corinthians → (Possibly) earliest Christian writing outside of NT
 3. Ignatius of Antioch (early 100s)
 - a. Bishop being taken to Rome for execution
 - b. Left 7 epistles
 - c. Stressed leadership of bishops
 4. Polycarp of Smyrna: Letter & story of martyrdom
 5. *Didache* (c. 75-150)
 - a. “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”
 - b. Manual for worship & church order
 - c. Noted for discussion of eucharist & baptism

B. Justin Martyr (c. 150)

1. Most important early apologist
2. A converted student of philosophy
3. Twofold preparation for Christ
 - a. Judaism/Old Testament

- b. Philosophy → Natural theology
 - C. Irenaeus
 - 1. Life
 - a. Student of Polycarp
 - b. Bishop of Lyons under terrible persecution
 - 2. Polemicist against Gnosticism
 - 3. *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*
 - a. First biblical theology
 - b. More biblical than philosophical in theology
 - D. Clement of Alexandria
 - 1. Head of catechetical school
 - 2. Introduced philosophical element → systematic theology
 - 3. Founder of Alexandrian school of thought
 - E. Tertullian
 - 1. Latin writer from North Africa
 - 2. Wrote apologies, polemics, practical works
 - 3. Major Contributions
 - a. Trinity: 3 persons in one substance
 - b. Nature of Christ: 2 substances in one person
 - 4. Later joined separatist Montanists
 - F. Origen
 - 1. Successor to Clement of Alexandria
 - 2. Died as a result of Decius's persecution
 - 3. Prolific writer
 - 4. Systematic theology: *On First Principles*
 - 5. Allegorical interpretation → Levels
 - a. Literal: Thou shalt not commit adultery.
 - b. Moral: "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox" means one should support clergy financially
 - c. Mystical: Highest meaning, dealing w/ Christ and Christian's relationship to God
 - 6. Subordination of Christ to the Father
 - a. "Right-wing" Origenism: Stressed eternity (eternal "begottenness") of the Son
 - b. "Left-wing" Origenism: Stressed eternal subordination of the Son
 - 7. Some odd theological views
 - 8. Never canonized
- ### III. Challenge of Heresy
- A. Heresies
 - 1. Nature
 - a. Original meaning: schism or division
 - b. Serious doctrinal error
 - c. Evangelical concern: Threats to gospel truth
 - 2. Montanism
 - a. Led by Montanus & two prophetesses
 - b. Taught a new era of the Holy Spirit
 - 1) "The New Prophecy": Received revelations
 - 2) Counted as forerunner by Charismatic movement
 - c. Ardently premillennial

- d. Morally strict
- e. Famous adherents: Tertullian, Perpetua?
- 3. Major threat: Gnosticism
 - a. Matter is evil; the spiritual is good
 - b. God did not create matter
 - c. Salvation is through a secret knowledge (*gnosis*)
 - d. Christology
 - 1) Christ had no physical existence
 - 2) Only Christ's teachings matter
 - 3) Eliminates Christ's death & resurrection → No atonement
- 4. Marcion
 - a. Simplified Gnosticism: God of the OT was evil, & he created the earth
 - b. Accepted only some of Paul's epistles and part of Luke's writings
 - c. Christ → No physical existence
 - d. Threat: Created a *church*
- B. Responses
 - 1. Recognizing canon of Scripture
 - 2. Apostolic succession
 - a. Tracing authority by ordination back to the apostles
 - b. Criteria of apostolic continuity: apostolic Scripture, apostolic tradition, apostolic episcopate
 - c. Pragmatic solution but wrong in principle
 - 3. Creeds
- C. Apostles' Creed
 - 1. Earliest summary of Christian doctrine
 - 2. Labels
 - a. Traditionally "Apostles Creed"
 - b. Called "Rule of Faith" by early church
 - 3. Formed between 100s & late 400s-500s
 - 4. Use
 - a. Baptismal confession
 - b. Guide to essential Christian teaching
 - 5. Implications
 - a. Shows Christ-centered teaching
 - b. Shows how church stressed essential nature of doctrine
 - c. Shows our continuity to the ancient church
 - 6. Controversial sections
 - a. Christ "descended into hell"
 - 1) Most common view: "the grave"
 - 2) Reformation era: Vicarious atonement
 - b. "Holy catholic church"
 - 1) "Catholic" = "universal"
 - 2) Often rendered "Holy Christian Church"
 - 3) Defined by "the communion of saints"